



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"A Sanctuary in the City... Living Faith"

October 8, 2017

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-20; Philippians 3:4b-14

The Order of God's Love in Everyday Life

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When he sent me pictures for our bulletin covers, Aaron Van Heest explained: I found a couple hours to explore the church a bit with my camera. I enjoy the challenge of trying to capture some of the essence of who we are as a church in an image. Take a look at today's again—the order and simplicity, beauty in the ordinary. Aaron said: I think this one is my clear favorite. It's from the custodian closet and I love the symmetry and repetition. I also love how it represents the servanthood of Christ and the Church.

We serve Christ in our everyday routines and responsibilities. That's how we live faithfully out there beyond these walls and windows, as much as all we say and do in here. That could be the cover for a Shutterfly album of our Reformed Christian heritage.

To mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, sermons this month explore and try to capture some of the essence of who we are as a church—insights and priorities past which still guide our faith today. Scrolling pics on our church Facebook page show many people painting a house just blocks from here, spreading the reign of God's love in all creation. You see, beyond people with special spiritual vocations, all people's lives have the capacity to be holy. God calls all of us to serve Christ's purposes in whatever our so-called secular efforts at home, at work, at play. By extension, then, in full expression of our faithfulness, all of community life and our world becomes ordered with God's grace, not just sanctuaries and custodial closets of a church.

Of course, we know that ideal is not always real. Unlike our cover photo, my workshop at home and bookshelves here at church convey more shall we say asymmetrical disorder! Maybe you know it your own way. And then we see chaos and destruction after hurricanes—dishes, books, furniture, things that make a house a home strewn along a once well-ordered street, amid lumber, siding, shattered glass. We try to find some order and goodness amid storms of illness, stress, conflict in our personal lives. And then we catch news from Washington or North Korea. We see faces and hear stories from Las Vegas.

In Reformation Europe life was a terrible, bloody, fearful, disordered mess. Memories still fresh of half the population dying in plagues of black death. Medieval economic systems still oppressed masses of people. Shortly after Luther posted his 95 Theses, wars raged killing 100,000 people in Germany alone. In response, some people tried to separate from the world. Threats and promises about life after death in heaven or hell fueled emotional and financial exploitation by abusive powers in the church. Twenty years after Luther's pen unleashed real-life hell, John Calvin fled Catholic France as a refugee and settled in Geneva, Switzerland. He tried to inspire all Christians to live holy lives whatever their jobs and circumstances, and so make their city part of God's heavenly commonwealth. More on how Calvin pursued that order of grace in society in a minute.

First, we go back about 2500 years earlier to Hebrews wandering in the desert. In part, because that was one cover photo of faith for Calvin. Remember the backstory. Famine drove them as refugees to Egypt. They become slaves. Now they flee again, refugees from Pharaoh's power to empower their own society in a Promised Land. Along their forty-year pilgrimage, Moses pauses to chat with the Holy One about how to get it done. He gets a Divine download of the Ten Commandments app, surely wishing he carried a phone or tablet screen rather than

blocks of stone! And the real question, of course, is how to get everyone to download and live that divine app.

You shall not kill or lie or steal, commit adultery or covet other people's property. They're often viewed as a kind of litmus test of individual faithfulness. And okay, we'd all like clear guidelines for living rightly with God. We all want to be good. We want salvation ... however we understand life in the eternity of God's love. But, friends, more than a way to confirm or condemn personal morality, they are God's gift to guide our way of life in community. You see, in the biblical Hebrew vision of life, individual salvation is not the primary concern. Yes, faith begins with what's deeply personal. Yet it's always fulfilled in relation with others and all creation. The Ten Commandments (and over 600 others in the Law, because life isn't so clear and simple)—these commandments shape community relations. In the Bible's first pages, God calls us to help create abundant life in Holy Love. The Law guides how we do it; how we cultivate a Divine order of grace in society; a sacred sanctuary of security, joy, peace that God intends for all life everywhere. At the heart, in God's grace, we see how our actions shape community and how community shapes us.

That's what Paul's letters tried to help earliest Christians see. And from his own life, he zooms focus even deeper into the human heart. The Ten Commandments are no engineering manual for human robots. Faithful righteousness cannot be achieved by us perfectly implementing the Law. That's what religious leaders like Scribes and Pharisees tried to do in Jesus' day. That's what inspired Paul to persecute early Christians. Then he got the real picture of human fallibility and loving faithfulness. You see, friends, we all know that laws on paper or computer or stone tablets are only tools, as good as the humans who put them to use, for better or worse. As hearts shape behavior, often even the best laws get twisted for bad purposes. Insecurities, greed, conflict, pride, fear twist our intentions and infect the good and loving image of God in each of us. Rather than sacrificial service to others like

Jesus, we pursue self-centered desires. Beyond individual morality, Reformers publicly addressed how this sin lives powerfully and breeds harm in community. As one of my favorite seminary professors invited: “If you don’t know anything about sin, come on down to my church! We’re running a clinic in it!”

So how do we get out the mops and brooms to clean up and spread the reign of God’s love and peace in our everyday lives? Paul urged the Philippians to see that it’s not his individual efforts or yours and mine that will enable us to be so close with God. I want to know Christ, he cries out, as the righteous foundation for faith. Jesus tells us that he came to help fulfill the law—the order of God’s love in our everyday lives. Beyond literal application, Jesus often expands people’s perception and reflection. Seek the Spirit. See the intent. That’s what we implement. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount. You shall not kill ... Jesus says remember that begins with simple anger. (Matt 5:21-22) Then, of course, there’s the time religious leaders quizzed him about the Law and he gives us the Greatest Commandment.

Friends, in Spirit and in practice that’s the essence of who we are as a church—with our mops and brooms, with laptops and screens, with our serving spoons and paint brushes, with listening ears, singing tongues, and caring hearts. Take a look again at our bulletin cover—the order and beauty in the ordinary; the simplicity of how we orient our hearts to serve humbly with love, even when challenges and details prove complicated and solutions less than clear and simple. A few weeks after the first message with this picture, Aaron sent me another version adapted by a friend. She had drawn in eyes and sunglasses, mustaches and lipstick, hats and hair ribbons, an arm holding a spyglass, a sea captain calling “Ahoy!” “That one is not for print!” Aaron stressed. Still he appreciated the levity, balancing his often more serious subjects.

And I don't know. Maybe it should be printed. With good humor and serious commitment, we put a face on God's purposes for everyday life. We make Sacred Grace real in our lives, from hearts overflowing with God's love. You see, friends, from the problems Luther protested through the witness of John Calvin and many others, the Reformation is ultimately all about ethics. I'd love to talk for hours about Biblical insights and theological ideas from the Reformation. In the end, how we behave matters at least as much as what we say we believe. How we *live faith*, following Jesus amid the winding pathways of our workplaces and homes and Facebook and the world wide web.

So maybe here's where we can go back to Calvin in Geneva for inspiration in our lives 500 years later. Calvin lead efforts through the church to partner with city government. To provide for refugees streaming in from all directions. To educate all people—men, women and children—no matter how wealthy or not. To create hospitals that all may have health care. You may know, among many activities of our congregation's over the past quarter century, keystones include a free health clinic, Edison School tutoring, Ministry with Community, Loaves and Fishes, and welcoming the Zamels this past year. And Calvin instituted a model for democracy in our country and around the world. Now friends, we will rightly have differences in perspective and opinion on issues of our day. And in the great heritage of John Calvin and others, among the many ways we show God's love through ministry and mission, we Presbyterians believe that it is precisely part of our faithful witness to engage concerns of our day educationally, socially, politically, actively. And how we do it, of course, makes all the difference!

How do we bring the order of God's love in our everyday lives? How do we, like Paul, press on toward the prize of the heavenly vision and call God gives us in Christ Jesus?

This is where I find Calvin's "three uses of the Law" to be a helpful guide, frame, or paradigm, for the many personal and communal concerns we face together. Three uses or functions of the all those commandments, all the instruction the Holy Spirit imparts and Jesus embodied as he lived the great commandment. As we face realities of our world ... First, like a mirror, we name the wrongs we see and know. We talk with others and make judgments about what is right and what is not. And closely related, second, like a fence, we work to restrain powers of evil and potential for harm.¹ Until humans are perfectly moral (ahh, never!) regulations and restrictions remain a crucial part of community life. We name wrongs and restrain evil even at some cost to our own freedom. You see, in the Sacred Order of life, freedom as a divine gift to us always balances with need for responsibility. Reformers knew life goes far beyond doing what I want, when I want, how I want. True freedom in Christ, Paul urges repeatedly, means pursuing God's vision for goodness even at personal expense—bearing our cross. Serving others in need beyond my own pleasure. Speaking up and acting out when people need to be healed, and loved, and welcomed, and empowered. That's what Jesus lived. That's why Jesus died. That's what the Resurrection of Christ declares and promises for all of us. That's the greatest power of God's love we can trust will redeem us and transform all creation.

And that resurrection power gets embodied in "the third use of the law." The first two uses of the Law can categorize and condemn, inducing fear or guilt. Friends, we know fear and a sense of failure may motivate us to pursue goodness in the short term. But they will never provide deep and lasting peace. And that's what God wants for us all—life in the fullness of joy, hope, and peace. So, Calvin urged a third use of the Law to teach and guide and empower toward that fullness. It's about all the ways we find to truly live Jesus' greatest and most important commandment. Love God. Love neighbor. And all people, even strangers, family members, former friends who seem enemies at the moment—they're all our neighbors to be loved.

It is the true spirit of righteousness, as Paul says, that never thinks we've arrived at faithful perfection. More than all my gains as assessed by some cultural or religious standard of accomplishment, Paul writes, I want to know Christ and the power of resurrection. And I press on evermore toward life in the fullness of that reformation. All of us as the Church reformed are always about to be reformed some more!

So let's make it real. What does that look like today? Ordering our society with God's grace is a little more difficult than organizing a custodial closet. Still, if we could capture the essence of John Calvin and who we are, with these three uses of the law, if he were here with us, how might he see and urge us to respond to recent concerns?

Chrissy and I shared communion at the Fountains this past week. Chrissy read Psalm 19—how we know God's glory in the Law and in all creation. After we finished, one lady asked: what about hurricanes? What about Las Vegas? Did I mention it was Chrissy's first time there?! She answered beautifully—how God is in the helpers, people who go in to pull others out of flooded houses, or clean up and rebuild far beyond their own little patch of home. And in Vegas we saw how ordinary people went into help mode immediately—breaking things apart to make splits and stretchers; or simply holding another person she had never met in her arms as he died so he would not be alone.

First use of the Law: it's pretty clear that killing 58 and injuring hundreds more innocent people is wrong. What about what shaped the man's heart; what possibilities in our society enable it to happen in the first place?

Second use of the Law: in the aftermath, we've rightfully heard much discussion about security measures at Casinos or concert venues. And even the NRA has

supported laws to restrict a “bump-stock” modification of weapons that enable such rapid-fire horror. What else can or should be done?

Third use of the Law: we celebrate first responders and ordinary helpers.

We persevere with grace not fear through all the ways less dramatic, yet no less important, that we live with compassion and sacrificial love each day.

Long ago, God’s Spirit swept through a desert and guided people with a law toward a Promised Land. Centuries later, God’s Spirit swept into cities like ancient Philippi and Reformation Geneva and blowing through people like St. Paul and John Calvin, and here in Kalamazoo that Spirit blows through me and you. Whatever our wilderness places, dear friends, open our hearts to feel God’s Loving Spirit of gentleness and restlessness and resurrection blow through our routines, our responsibilities, our relationships. Then arise with our mops or laptops and listening ears, to seek Christ, to serve Christ, to put a face on the order of God’s love in Christ in our everyday life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ See Joseph D. Small, *Conversations with the Confessions: Dialogue in the Reformed Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2005), 214-215.